The basic unit of the Chinese language is the zi (字), i.e. a Chinese word. Each zi has a written form (called a character, made up of strokes), a sound (made up of consonant and vowel) and a meaning (or multiple meanings). When we speak or write Chinese, we string zi together to form terms, phrases and sentences.

In Putonghua (the spoken form of Modern Standard Chinese) each zi is pronounced in one of four tones:

1st tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged

2nd tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high

3rd tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high

4th tone: 4 = diacritical mark \ pitch: 5 to 1, highest to lowest

To pronounce each zi below, follow its pinyin and the given tone number. Light-sound words, which have no definite pitch, carry no diacritical mark and are marked by 0.

This week: Words about BRIC

印

Putonghua pronunciation: yin 4
Cantonese pronunciation: yan 3
Meanings: first character of “India”-transliterated

印度 (Yin Du 44 = “India” transliterated)’s 古文明 (gu wen ming 322 = ancient-writing-bright/enlighten = ancient civilization) produced 印度教 (Yin Du jiao 444 = “Hindu”-transliterated- religion = Hinduism), 瑜伽 (yu jia 21 = “yoga”-transliterated), Buddhism.

India launched 獨立運動 (du li yun dong 2444 = single/independent-stand-move-act = independence movement) under 甘地 (Gan Di 14 = “Gandhi”-transliterated), split with Islamic 巴基斯坦 (Ba Ji Si Tan 1113 = “Pakistan”-transliterated), ended British rule in 1947.

India has advanced 信息科技 (xin xi ke ji 4114 = message-information-science-technology = information technology), but 賤民 (jian min 42 = cheap/worthless-people = the untouchables) still exist under 種姓制度 (zhong xing zhi du 3444 = seed/birth-surname/lineage-system = caste system).

by Diana Yue